Notes on the Hidden Cinema of Kenneth Anger

by Rebekah Wood

All of Anger's films are separate movements in one vast film, a large symphony in which all kinds of rituals occur -Elliot Stein .

(Anger), the true cosmic explorer -Jonas Mekas .

The film is the art of managing objects. It is the incarnation of the dream of its inventor... The film makes possible the realization of what cannot be realized in life. -Dziga Vertov.

Cinema

Anger has maintained his position as enfant terrible of the avant-garde for forty years. Brought to the eye in sharp and scandalous confrontation from rigorously conceived sets of oppositions, Anger's films explore the world in a complex, visionary manner, one which consistently illuminates pure image and rises against the limitations of language.

Legend

Kenneth Anger, more than any other avant-garde film-maker is the conscious artificer of his own myth. -P. Adams Sitney.

Film-maker, Magus, Occultist, Controversialist: an inextricable part of the Anger legend are the lost and finished films. Conversely, incident and detail which surround the lost work serve to compound the legend. Biographic and filmographic detail interact - a mutual dynamic. The lost films occur at crucial points in Anger's career and define major issues in avant-garde cinema: artistic (form and chaos under the rites of experimentation); and practical (finance, censorship, illegality).

Anger's precocious and non-prolific career remains partially hidden. Like Welles and Eisenstein, his progress is marked by aborted projects and appalling disappointments. Anger's films have been burnt, banned, lost, stolen, revised, withdrawn, sold to private collectors and, most frequently, disrupted for lack of means.

Resistance

More real than Anger, 'artificer' is the depth and complexity of Anger's cinema. Its absolute nature defies easy analytic or anecdotal dissemination. Anger has significantly altered some of his films to produce slight or radical change in meaning, increasing the irrational percept that the work has its autonomous life (an imaginistic viewing experience).

Anger's montage can be of such formidable complexity (multi-layer, non-synchronous transformations), it would be impossible to log an Anger film shot by shot. Anger's cinema-montage of attractions, conceived exactly as Eisenstein's - takes the spectator into psychological, emotional and intellectual spaces which are ineffable. The implications of Anger's arcane undertakings, his idealist's insistence on insight has decisive moral significance. His films are never the impersonal, exclusively esoteric product of the secret society, but an order in which the spectator takes his place.

Six Films Before Fireworks

I think that children generally do exert influence on their toys, that their choice is directed by inclinations and desires which, however vague and unformulated, are nevertheless very real. Still, I would not deny the contrary, that is to say, that toys act upon the child, particularly upon one with literary or artistic inclinations...

There is a kind of toy recently on the increase upon which I shall pronounce no judgement of value. I mean the scientific toy. Its principal defect is its high cost, but it can provide extended amusement and develop, within the child, the taste for surprising and wonderful effects .

- Baudelaire: La Morale de Joujou, 1859 .

It developed as a kind of hobby, even though I never looked on it as any kind of a lark. I took myself quite seriously as a child. I was going to make films and put my name of them: a film by Kenneth Anger

- Kenneth Anger, 1989.

Who Has Been Rocking My Dreamboat?

(1941, black and white, silent, 16mm, seven minutes, filmed in Santa Monica). Conceived, directed, photographed, edited by Kenneth Anger. Cast: neighbourhood children.

Summer before Pearl Harbour. Using rapid cross-cutting, the playworld of children shown over-shadowed by war. Newsreel holocaust flash-cuts cross their reverie. The children stop playing and fall to the ground in mock death. Smoke billows over the still bodies.

Tinsel Tree

(1942, black and white, silent, 16mm, three minutes, filmed in Santa Monica). Conceived, directed, photographed, edited by Kenneth Anger.

Using hand-coloured over-tint, ritual burning of the family Christmas tree. From close-up: branches decked with baubles and tinsel to stripping and burning the tree. Scarlet and gold coloration.

Prisoner of Mars

(1942, black and white, silent, 16mm, eleven minutes, filmed in Santa Monica). Conceived, directed, photographed, edited by Kenneth Anger. Camera assistant, Charles Vreeland. Minatures and costumes by Kenneth Anger. Cast: Kenneth Anger - the boy elect from earth. First formal use of serial-chapter aesthetic. Science fiction rendition of the minotaur myth. Anger 'chosen... boy of the future' rocketed to Mars, lands in a labyrinth littered with the bones of previous travellers.

The Nest

(1942, black and white, silent, 16mm, twenty minutes, filmed in Santa Monica). Conceived, directed, photogrqaphed, edited by Kenneth Anger. Cast: Bob Jones (brother); Jo Wittaker (sister); Dare Harris (later John Derek, boyfriend).

A precocious study of latent eroticism. Signalling to one another with mirrors, a perfect brother and sister commune. A third party arrives to interfere. Harmony is broken. Violence ensues.

Escape Episode

(1944, black and white, silent, later re-edited with sound in 1946, music by Scriabin, 16mm, thirty minutes, filmed in Los Angeles). Conceived, directed, photographed, edited by Kenneth Anger. Cast: Marilyn Granas (the girl); Bob Jones (the boy); Nora Watson (the guardian).

An experimental study showing a conflict of moral values. Set in a decaying stucco-gothic seaside church. Free adaptation of the Andromeda myth. Following the psychology of the protagonist, a sensitive adolescent girl, the film becomes increasingly subjective. Stifled by the hand of religious fanaticism, the girl encounters a 'nature boy', Perseus of the beach. The pair conspire to break parental

bonds. Premiered at the Coronet Theatre, Hollywood, 1947.

Drastic Demise

(1945, black and white, using negative insert, silent, 16mm, five minutes, filmed in Hollywood). Conceived, directed, photographed, edited by Kenneth Anger. Cast: anonyous American crowd.

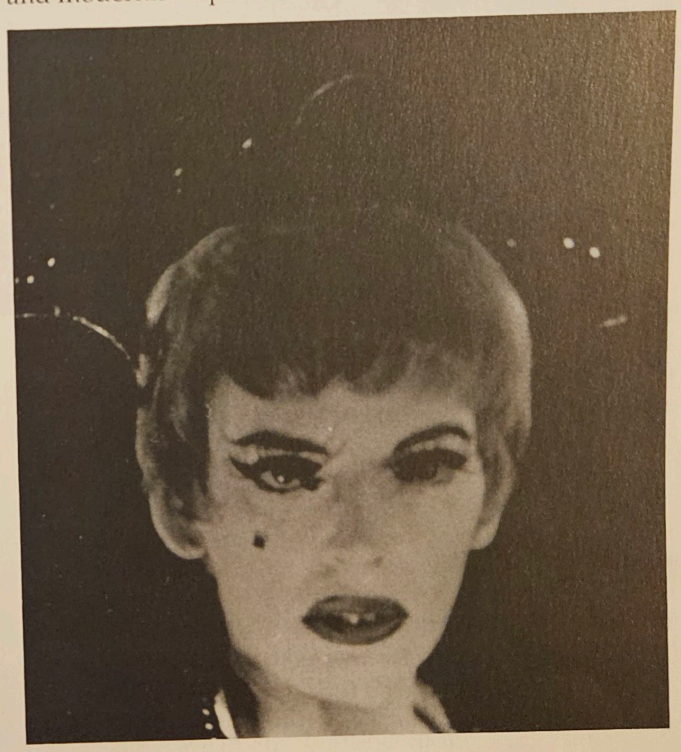
Hand-held camera plunged into the 'sexually turned-on' crowds of V. J. Day. Argument constructed, negative versus positive image - hysteria of a euphoric Hollywood Boulevard crowd. Marking the ambivalence of V. J. Day with a mushroom-cloud-end: the end of the war; the birth of the atomic age. An accompanying original score for percussion. *Escape Episode, Drastic Demise, Fireworks* were featured at the San Franciso Museum of Modern Art, and offered as a package for rental, 1947.

Emanations

The cinematic art of Anger has been intensely ritualistic since *Fireworks*. From what remains - anecdotal description - a picture of an aesthetic emerges. Elements, fragments of ritual and idea make toward central concerns to be refined by Anger's ascetic deliberation. Anger's absorption with psycho-drama is clear. Narrative direction through the transformation of myth, archetype and ritual action. Emphasis on human interaction: sexuality, coercion, power relations (*The Nest*). Inception of Anger's morally disconcerting universe. Tension between fact and fiction, reality and dream. Film as the intermediate zone between subjective experience and external event (*Who has been Rocking my Dreamboat?*).

Two figures arise. First: Anger, his own best organizer, bringing will to bear. The creation of form, fulfillment of fantasy. Construction of a child's world - ideal, retreat from strict rearing (*Escape Episode*). Second: The Seeker, rebellious, heart-troubled, perpetual adolescent - in Pierrot, Scorpio, Sandy and Anger himself as Magus on film. Of dual significance: fictional and mythographic figures are biographic projections in this respect.

In clear focus: Anger's thraldom to the fantastical, here classical myth and science fiction. The 'external recurrence of myth and archetype, an irrationalistic doctrine, always relevant, is extensively present in Anger's films: *Prisoner of Mars, Escape Episode, Rabbit's Moon, Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* - and consummately in *Lucifer Rising*, the forever boyhood of science fiction. Science Fiction is the fantastical meeting ground of archaic myth and modernist aspiration.



Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome

Melies' *Voyage dans la Lune*

The artist believes in the future because he is part of it.
-Modest Mussorgsky.

Affinity to this genre points to another of the creative collisions inherent in Anger's cinema: the anomoly of ancient vision and rigorous modernity -the genre dedicated to make-believe, source of persistent technical innovation - Anger's cinema.

Melies prepared many early Science Fiction films... A Trip to the Moon *1902), set the criteria for future Science Fiction efforts, clearly identifying the necessary attributes for an excellent Science Fiction production - good story, creative special effects, precise cinematography and a generous supply of imagination .*
-Forrest Ackerman, A Reference Guide to Ameerican Science Fiction FiIms, Vol. I.

Specific images recur. The ritualized burning of the Christmas tree returns in *Fireworks;* the act of ritual self-preparation (ablutions and mirrors) in *The Nest* will mark *Puce Moment, Scorpio Rising* and *Kustom Kar Kommandos.* The mirror-signals of the perfect pair in *The Nest* reappear: Isis and Osiris signalling across a red desert in *Lucifer Rising. Who Has Been Rocking My Dreamboat?* and *Invocation of My Demon Brother* show private worlds threated by war; perpetual violence and chaos.

Magic

The cinema is essentially the revealer of a whole occult life with which it puts us into direct contact

- Antonin Artaud.

The Love that Whirls

(1949, colour, no other credits available)

The Love that Whirls *was inspired by Frazer's* The Golden Bough *and was about a human sacrifice- specifically an Aztec ritual in which a youth is chosen to be king. It's about symbolic Kingship. After one year, the day comes when the King is sacrificed. When his time is up, his flutes are broken and there is a ritual. I found this a compelling situation, but the film had a few glimpses of nudity, which at that time simply wasn't done, even though the context of the nudity made it clear that it was nothing to do with lewdness and obscenity. The film was Kodachrome and had to be developed at the Eastman-Kodak processing plant. Kodak ended up keeping it, saying that they couldn't allow their film to be used for nudity!*

- Kenneth Anger 1989.

Thelema Abbey

(1955, black and white , sound, 16mm, ten minutes, filmed in Thelema Abbey, Cefalu, Sicily).

I have made one documentary: Thelema Abbey. *This was about Aleister Crowley's erotic frescos. The film was made for Houlton Television which was a branch of 'Picture Post' an extinct British magazine. They lost it. I've tried to find it and it's untraceable. I lived in Crowley's house, alone, but that kind of thing doesn't bother me. I had to. It was the only way to get it done. I spent three months there scraping the whitewash, which had turned to stone, off the walls. It was a big job, but one of the most exciting things I have ever done. They were still there - all those hyper-psychedelic murals: goblins and demons in fabulous colour, scarlet and pumpkin-red. Actually they were good paintings, similar in feel to Ensor .*

- Kenneth Anger, 1989.

Corollaries

Magic, labyrinthine in its connection. Anger has claimed magick his life-work, the camera his magickal weapon. A magical scale resonates in the work and can be understood in many ways: -

Governing Magick - Aleister Crowley. Crowley's principles of nature and thought have esoteric value, rich inferences for the initiate - 'follow me into the flower called nowhwere'. More real, Crowley's work through Anger's work is an 'open' system, an ordering in process, of infinite extension, not superstitious limitation. Crowley's theorems are at once original and the superlative syntheses of many alternative systems: metaphysical, alchemical (through alchemic, chemical and scientific), occult, astrologic, magical. Anger's legerdemain with Crowley's magickal doctrine is his medium for categorization / deliberation on infinite universal possibility.

Man is ignorant of his nature , of his own being and power. Even his idea of his limitations is based on experience of the past; and every step in progress extends his empire. There is therefore no reason to assign theoretical limits to what he may be or what he may do .

- Aleister Crowley, Magick in Theory and Practice.

Magic, the antecedent of a scientific sensibility, thus antecedes cinema-science. Cinema has its own fundamental science. Magic and Science mark cinema's inception: the transforming tricks of Melies, deceptive fictions, depend equally on the skill of the prestidigiteur and on scientific empiricism.

Magicians have been falsely considered lunatics. So have those that project dreams that come scientifically true.

- Parker Tyler, Underground Film.

Strong Magic - implications for the person; self-magic of the Magus.

In so far as religion assumes the world to be directed by concious agents who may be turned from their purpose by persuasion, it stands in fundamental antagonism to magic as well as to science both of which take for granted that the source of nature is determined, not by the passion of personal being, but by the operation of immutable laws.

- Frazer (on the poetic magician), The Golden Bough.

Crowley's magick stands in opposition to the caprice of one supra-being, asserting *magick as the Science and Art of causing change to occur in conformity to the will.*

Every intentional act is a magical act - Aleister Crowley.

Making movies is casting spells - Kenneth Anger.

On film, Anger performs as Magus. The circle, which includes the spectator, seals.

The greatest of sorcerers would be the one who could cast a spell on himself to the degree of taking his own phantomasgora for autonomous apparitions .

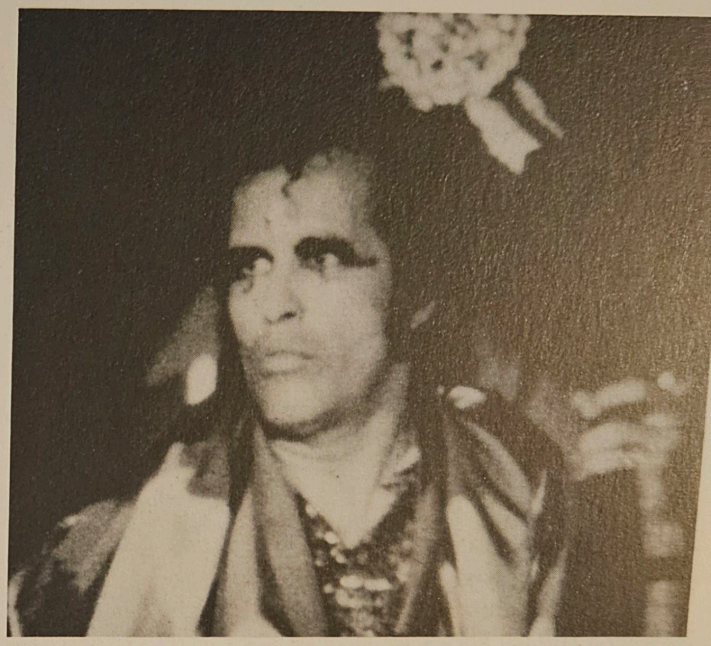
- Juan Luis Borges, The Circular Ruins.

Magic and Cinema - poetic Method. The suggestive nature of metaphor brings unknown, occult (hidden), unexpected relationships. Content is made graphic/visible, understood - a materiality best suited to film.

Meta - change for:-

Any required change may be effected by the application of the proper kind and degree of force in the proper manner, through the proper medium...

-Aleister Crowley, Magic in Theory and Practice..



Anger as the Magus in *Invocation of My Demon Brother.*

Anger's cinema - metaphors, flirtations, not allusion, reminder, or analogy, but with an aspect of each of Anger's poetic manners - personal, provocative, a procession of exaggerations and intensifications with the black brilliance of macabre fantasy - Anger's magic(k)al atmospheres and illuminations.

Paris

Between 1950 and 1961 Anger lived in Paris. There he attempted three astoundingly ambitious film projects: based on Jean Cocteau's *Le Jeune Homme et la Mort*, Lautreamont's *Maldoror* and Pauline Reage's *L'Histoire d'O.*

The surrealists Breton and Soupault hailed Lautreamont as a forefather who, with Baudelaire and Rimbaud, was part of an unholy trinity of genius. This revolutionary classic [Maldoror] *remained truly an 'underground' work, little discussed and less read .*

- Alexis Lykiard, translator of Maldorer.

Unnoticed on first publication (Paris 1868), by the end of the century it had become a cause celebre. *Maldoror:* an epic-poetic testament reveals a shrouded twilight world, half-ecstasy, half-nightmare of angels, grave diggers, madmen and perverted children.

The Story of O was a notorious underground classic - a rare example of pornography sublimated to art. It first appeared via clandestine circulation in Paris, 1954.

Neither a fantasy nor a case history, with its alternate beginnings and endings; its simple direct style (that of a fable); its curious air of abstraction, of indpendence from time, place and personality, it resembles a legend - the spiritual history of a saint or martyr ... the story gradually opens out into a Daedalian maze of perverse relations - a clandestine society of formality and elegance, where the primary bond is mutual complicity in dedication to the pleasures of sadism and masochism.

-New York Times Review.

Le Jeune Homme et la Mort

1951, black and white, silent, 16mm, filmed in Paris. Cast: Jean Babilee (young man); Nathalie Philipart (death). From Jean Cocteau's 1947 ballet, of the same title.

The first few months after I arrived in Paris, I was fortunate enough to see, at the Theatre Champs Elysees, a wonderful performance of Jean Cocteau's Le Jeune Homme et La Mort *danced by the original cast of Nathalie Phillipart and Jean Babilee. The ballet was set to Bach's* Passacaglia. *The set was a beautiful backdrop of the Paris skyline in the 1920's. I discussed the ballet with Cocteau and told him I'd like to film it. He gave me permission and wrote me a letter to find a producer - saying that he had full confidence and wanted me to direct it. I went round, approaching some of the big names like Pauvert. Despite the fact I had Cocteau's name, my budget was too high. I never found a producer. I wanted to film in 35mm, technicolour with a sound stage. I managed to shoot a 16mm, black and white study-film. Just to have light, I filmed in Jean Babilee's garden. The young man hangs himself from a tree. It was winter - cold, every movement was accompanied by visible breath from the chill air. When death comes to take the young man, she is wearing a mask and stills -like the image of death in* Orphee. *I'm sorry I couldn't find backing. It would have been a classic - rented forever.*

-Kenneth Anger, 1989.

Maldoror

(Details unknown)

I discovered the book when I was quite young. I loved it, put a lot of passion into it. I found people to play the parts, I found settings, gaslit corners, places that still had the romantic look of a Second Empire. It was a terrific ambition to make this epic film-poem. I found ways to translate the text's extraordinary images. I planned to film a mid-19th century story taking place in 20th century Paris. I filmed 'the hymn to the ocean', on the beach at Deauville, with Rosella Hightower and members of the Marquis de Cuevas Ballet. They danced in the sea, tables were placed beneath the water line so the dancers could stand on their points. It looked as it they were standing on waves. The people who called themselves 'surrealists' were furious - this group of punks threatened me - they didn't want a Yank messing round with their sacred text. I just told them to go to hell!

I also managed to film the war of the flies and pins.I put bags of pins and dozens of flies into a glass container; revolved the container and filmed in close-up. As the pins dropped, the flies zig-zagged to escape. In slow-motion, an impressive image. That was about it. You can't conjure up a movie, unless you have money.

-Kenneth Anger, 1989.

L'Histoire d'O

L'Histoire d'O

1961, black and white, silent, 16mm, 20 minutes, filmed in Paris. From Pauline Reage's book *L'Histoire d'O*, 1954. *To help finance my stay in Paris, I wrote* Hollywood Babylone *and J J Pauvert published it. He also published* L'Histoire d'O, *an elegantly written sado-masochistic fairytale, very dreamlike and totally implausible. I thought it could make an interesting experimental film. I got permission to do it and I had some money - but not enough to see the whole thing through. I was helped by the boyfriend of the girl playing 'O'. It turned out that his money was bounty from the kidnapping of Eric Peugeot - grandson of the auto magnate. I knew nothing about this. I found out in a very abrupt manner. The yound man was arrested and I was questioned about the money being used for my film. The young lady playing 'O' was the daughter of a minister. Her parents knew nothing about her being in the film and when they did find out filming came to an instant halt.*

- Kenneth Anger, 1989.

Inferences

The poetics and metaphysics of symbolism mark cinema's inception. Anger's cinema draws from liberal literary form. His stay in Paris compounded an extensive knowledge of fin-de-siecle literature. His work has an affinity with romantic symbolism: nuance over ratiocination, sensibility over logic; the decadent ethos of elaborate vicissitude, emblem and hyperbole. French romantic symbolism creates its own labyrinthine enigmas: both prophecy and satire intensely involved with subject yet critical of its own limits. Symbolism reminds itself of its own affected limitations and fetishistic downfall, a form which favours arguing with itself and includes its predecessors.

Anger's sojourn in Paris involved an artistic realignment. Like Cocteau, like Lautreamont, Anger's *Fireworks* marks an extreme positioning: Anger, as the son of his own work, a self-engendering; ill-constructed as narcissim.

This doubling: Ducasse's *Lautreamont* Cocteau's *Magic Mirror*, Anger's *Magick Lantern* and public work as Magus, is a self-engendering which usurps the family.

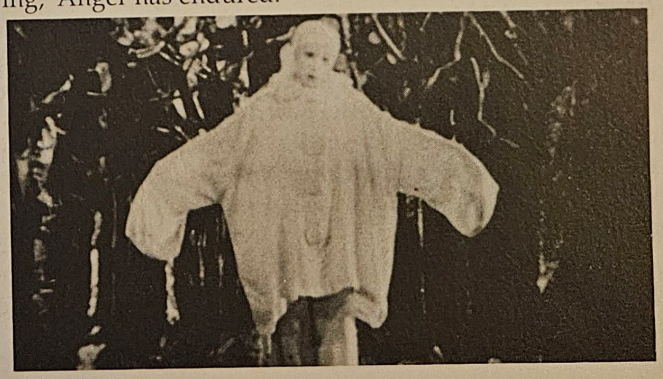
I am my son, my father, my mother and myself.

-Antonin Artaud

Finis

Anger's works contain the key to their own elucidation in the form of clear parallelisms between his films; direct and indirect connection to definite metaphysical, magickal and artistic contexts within which he has elected to situate himself. Once these connections have been made they may as easily be eschewed: his style, rarity of vision and complexity of thought are indelibly original.

His cinema is filled with disordering passions. It is also scientifically cool and technically precise. The singularity of his ideas drives through the most co-operative of arts. His perfectionism of image defies avant-garde economy. Anger's is a supra-effort of concentration to transmute self, in the spirit of the translator, medium, recorder and magician, into a universal art. Non-prolific, non compromising, Anger has endured.



Rabbit's Moon

A Salacious Footnote

Senators in Bondage

(1976, Colour, sound, 16mm, $1,776)

The Eisenstein of Satanism strikes again! Prints of Kenneth Anger's first limited edition Senators in Bondage *The master negative will be sealed; no further prints will be struck. Edition strictly limited to 13 copies in honour of the 13 original colonies. Each print individually hand-coloured, supplied in a red, white and blue box, bound in chain.* Senators in Bondage *movie metaphor of mighty eminences brought low. A vitriolic bon-bon concocted with malice; a curio for this bicentennial year .*

-Abby Hirsch publications, New York, June, 1976.

Matelots en Menottes

(1977, Colour, sound, 16mm, $1,200)

Matelots en Menottes - *a return to the orginal subject of* Fireworks. *Kenneth Anger's second limited edition. Edition strictly limited to 12 copies.*

-Abby Hirsch Publications. New York, June 1977.

Denunciation of Stan Brakhage

(1979) Confirmed by Jonas Mekas, no other details.

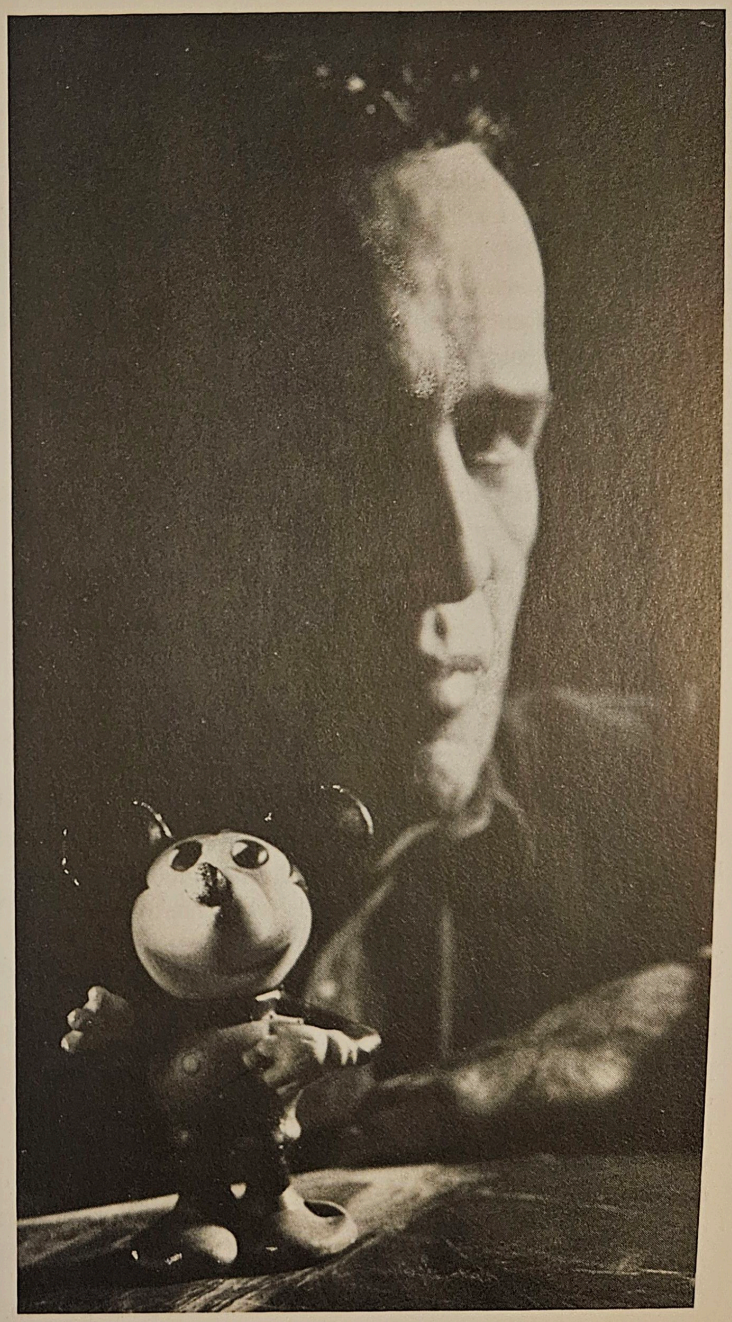
Mouse Heaven

(1987, colour, 16mm)

Scheduled for completion summer 1989; abandoned due to financial difficulties, no longer a work in progress. *Mouse Heaven* (a working title) based on Disney's original character (1928-1938). Planned as a fantastical collage. Faced with a gamut of marching Mickeys, the spectator would lose all perspective; using models, prints and original footage.

Hollywood Babylon

The movie! Negotiations in progress.



Anger and the star of *Mouse Heaven*, 1989. Photo: Kabbaz.

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Eaux d'Artifice: *This teenager became a cardinal through no fault of his own. He loved swishing around in big red capes and hats, he built Tivoli with church money which he had siphoned off.*

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Which contemporary film-makers do you respect? - None.

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The underground film-maker's art is finally a precarious one and reputations don't pay the rent.

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Lucifer: *it's been a continuing drama but I don't take any particular stance on it. I'm on top of it and I knew that sooner or later it would all work out.*

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